

You have chosen to study the history of the Middle East, at an advanced level, under professional historians of the Middle East. The first point I would like to make is that the history of history-writing on the Middle East is fairly short (by which I mean critical history as we practice it). Well into this century, there were no historians of the Middle East. There were, of course, Orientalists -- people trained above all in the languages of the Middle East, whose art had a strong philological bent. Orientalism had its roots in the Enlightenment, and became a highly organized discipline in the 19th century, with major centers across Europe, and periodic international congresses later in the century. The Orientalists made tremendous advances in the publication of critical texts in Oriental languages. It would be a mistake now to downgrade their contribution to the broadening of the West's intellectual horizons. The Orientalists were the first to take a scientific interest in peoples beyond Europe -- the

first whose interest in the East did not rest solely on the desire to wage war, make profit, or win souls. But their interests remained anchored to language, either as a key to comparative linguistics or comparative culture. In those days, such studies were right at the forefront of intellectual debate. But slowly the study of language began to lose its grip, and so began the bleeding off of Orientalists into two new fields: the systematic study of the past and of the present.

The first people to write the history of the Middle East were Orientalists by training. They had the requisite languages to make some use of the texts they translated, and we soon find them compiling histories, alongside their philological treatises. They began to write biographies of the Prophet, and studies of early Islam, based on the original sources. When we look at these works today, they seem very old fashioned in their approach and method. But let us not forget that they were revolutionary in their time. These were the first histories to make systematic use of sources Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources, and so presented another view of the Islamic past, largely freed from the theological prejudices of the medieval Western sources. The Orientalists were the first historians of the Middle East. Most remained primarily Orientalists, and their historical work came later. But by this century, there were already scholars who, while trained as Orientalists, devoted most of their time to the writing of history. Gibb and Massignon come readily to mind. Both were trained very much in the Orientalist tradition. Both became historians of Islam.

The Orientalists were also the first researchers and commentators on the contemporary of the Middle East. The article which you read for today's session is about the way in which scholars trained first and foremost as Orientalists expanded their expertise into contemporary affairs. It began, once more, with the translation of texts -- in this case, the new newspapers that

began to appear in the Middle East in the late 19th century. It expanded into systematic projects for documenting and interpreting the contemporary Middle East.

At the time, of course, there was considerable opposition to both of these expansions of Orientalism. History, in the eyes of the philologists, was unscientific in comparison with philology. Its evidence was equivocal, and it was easily manipulated for partisan ends. The only evidence of any reliability in an Arabic chronicle was the language itself. This positivism would later collapse, along with the standing of philology as the mother of human sciences. But Orientalists generally disdained the dabbling of their colleagues in history. Nor did Orientalists look with favor on colleagues who began to work on contemporary affairs. The contemporary Islamic world was decadent, the remnant of a decayed civilization. What civilizing purpose could its study advance? Should it not be left to journalists and colonial administrators?

Disciplines have many ways of imposing discipline, the purpose of which is to erect fences around a the discipline, and then to defend them. This is almost inherent in the dynamic by which disciplines form and define themselves. Against it, however, is the power of human curiosity -- the power that leads people to peer over fences. Certainly this is the case with the development of Orientalism. Once trained in the relevant languages, Orientalists discovered that they could do more than analyze roots and meter. They could also read everything from documents in archives to newspapers. They could peer over the fence -- and some saw greener grasss on the other side. In this university, both the Department of Middle Eastern History and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies, are equal inheritors of this earlier rebellion against the declared priorities of classical Orientalism -- this violation of discipline. The philologists

were murdered by their sons, who thus were freed to become historians or commentators, or both.

And so emerged the separate discipline that we call the history of the Middle East. Yet this quick lesson in the history of historiography does not end here. For the field you have entered is no longer open ground. Here, too, there are fences, marking off ground; here, too, there are guards to assure that the fences are respected. Let me say from the outside that there isn't enough time here to map all of these fences for you, or to explain how they were laid down over the past forty years. For this purpose, I refer you to the short bibliography you have in your hand. These are pleading articles -- each one seeks to divide the history of the Middle East, and then to assign priorities to the various divisions. I strongly suggest you try to read these articles in the order that they appeared, and look for the shifts in emphasis. In fact, it would probably be a good idea for the School of History to collect and reproduce them for beginning M.A. students.

What I want to do here is to quickly sketch the fences as they stand today. These fences are of two kinds. The first kind divides the history of the Middle East by angles of approach: political history, social history, economic history, intellectual history, and so forth. These assume a heirarchy of significance.

The second kind divides the history of the Middle East into periods of time, that is, periodization, and assigns each period a place in a heirarchy of significance. And from these heirarchies is formed an ideal type of historian. The ideal type, of course, changes over time -- indeed it may change quite a bit over the span of a 40-year career. Today, you may be interested to know, the ideal historian is someone who is working on some aspect of social history, <sup>(or mental life)</sup> who frames his work in the paradigm of the Annales school or "political economy" in the Marxist sense, and is working on the 18th or even the 17th century.

Who erects the fences, who assigns significance? The synthesizing historians. These are historians whose stature is such that they are deemed qualified by their peers to set priorities, and who exercise their authority through works of historical synthesis that define the "state of the <sup>art</sup>." Gibb, Lewis, Rodinson, have all be synthesizing historians. When I was at your stage in my studies, Bernard Lewis was the preeminent synthesizing historian in the English-speaking world, thanks to works like The Arabs in History The Middle East and the West, and The Emergence of Modern Turkey. But his move to America and the Orientalism debate led him to withdraw to other pursuits. Today, Albert Hourani of Oxford is probably the most widely acknowledged of the synthesizing historians -- indeed, almost all of his output as a historian is synthesis. He himself is not an archive historian, and to my knowledge he has never cited a document in an archive. What he does do is carefully read and assess the work of others. When the Middle East Studies Association, 20 years ago, wanted someone to define the needs in the writing of Middle Eastern history, and set priorities, they called upon Hourani (the result is listed as an article on your sheet). Since then, he has issued periodic statements on where the field is headed and should be headed. I distinctly remember one of these sessions at Princeton, when I was a student. The campaign of admonition has recently reached a culmination in his book, A History of the Arab Peoples.

Let me first look at the preeminence of social history in the present heirarchy of significance. The history first written by Orientalists was largely cultural and religious, and soemtimes political -- in others words, the study of the past as lived and made by cultural and political elites who tend to generate the most paper in any society.

The study of society from the bottom up is essentially a French creation, which has percolated its way to historians of the

Middle East in a variety of ways. First of all, it affected the first French historians of the Middle East. Massignon himself was very much influenced by the Annales school, and was probably the first to apply it to work on cities and guilds. His influence was quite powerful, and we see its traces in the work of Lewis, who was a student of Massignon's in Paris, did his first article on guilds in the French style, and did much to pioneer the field of social and economic history. But it was H.A.R. Gibb who had the authority to pronounce this as a first priority of historians of the Middle East. Gibb issued the first clarion call for social history: "It is vital to stress the word 'society', " Gibb wrote, for "the nature and pressures of the internal social forces engaged have largely determined the working of [Middle Eastern] political structures." His students, especially at Harvard, took up the call, and include scholars such as Ira Lapidus and Roy Mottahedeh.

But what tipped the scale in the English-speaking world was the publication of Braudel's work on the Mediterranean in English.

Here was the Annales vision of total history, distilled into a masterpiece on a zone of the world that included part of the Middle East. Until then, many of the foremost historians of the Middle East were working the field of a kind of intellectual history best represented, for example, in the massive research on Afghani. The history of ideas and ideologies predominated.

But with Braudel, "total history" became the new mission. Hourani, who himself had been a political and intellectual historian, put in best when he announced that "social history seems likely to be the dominant mode of history writing for the present generation." This would later be developed with the entry of Marxist historians to the field -- again, first in France, with Maxime Rodinson, but later in the English-speaking world. As Peter Gran put it, we seek paradigm that "is able to describe the activities of the whole society as meaningful, and need not restrict itself to a narrative of political events and

elite biography, disembodied from the rest of society."

For those of you who didn't know, we are, in the words of Hourani, "now in the age of 'social history,' the study of economic relationships and the deep structures of society, and of changes in them, within a framework of ideas derived from Marxism, or from the historians of the Annales school, or from a mixture of the two. At its most interesting, this becomes a study of the relationships between power and wealth, how each of them affects the other: in other words, of 'political economy,' to use an old term which in recent years has been given a new usage."

This is a remarkable statement, especially as it is published in the year 1991, and is itself characteristic of abiding fact about the writing of Middle Eastern history: it is always well behind the general intellectual curve, breathlessly trying to catch up. We should work, Hourani tells us, within the framework of ideas of Marxism and the Annales school: these are the reigning orthodoxies in our "age of social history." It is a remarkable statement to publish in such a difficult year for Marxism. I want to bring a quote here from Ernest Gellner:

I can think of no comparable total collapse of faith. Belief-systems normally have a curious tenacity: people have a deep emotional and personal involvement in them, and do not abandon them easily. But the belief-system of the Marxist faith has been abandoned, and this has been true for some years. It has for some time been

almost impossible to find a Marxist in Eastern Europe, and it is now virtually impossible to find one in the Soviet Union -- not totally impossible, because among many million people anything can be found, but basically the faith is extinct.<sup>1</sup>

Except, apparently, among those who would lead us down the road to progress in the writing of Middle Eastern history.

And what of the once-powerful Annales school? It is not so easy to find an Annaliste in France today either. The decline of Marxism in the 1980s has coincided with the decline of the Annales school, as the paradigm has collapsed. I want to quote the biographer of Marc Bloch, who speaks of the "relative decline" of the school's influence:

Its championship of the poor, powerless, and inarticulate, its interdisciplinary bent, and heavy emphasis on structure and method have diminished. [Note here, too, the invocation of structure.] Indeed, some of the main spokesmen have abandoned the semblance of a unified mission and moved on to more conventional subjects and methodologies. There is discussion of the 'return to the event,' to descriptive and narrative history, and even to biography. This group that for so long withheld criticism from both the left and the right for its avoidance of the great subjects of modern and contemporary history, for its failure to treat short-term crises or confront the centrality of politics in human affairs, has increasingly lost its hold on the center because of its prolonged indifference to questions of power, conflict, and change.

We see, then, that Hourani is perhaps leading us down a dead end. The European historians are passing us in the other direction, on

the way out. If the East Europeans abandon Marxism, and the French abandon Annaliste history, what does that say about the the prospects for Hourani's "age of social history," built on both?

I could develop this further, but I want to move on. Make no mistake, it was important, even essential, that historians of the Middle East begin to make headway in the study of society at large. We are few, and our concentration in the history of ideas, demonstrated in the Afghani-fest, was skewing our picture. Who can deny the importance of the work done on cities by Andre Raymond and Ira Lapidus? On the plague by Michael Dols? I am a particular admirer of Abraham Marcus's book on Aleppo. But the "age of social history," now that it has had at least a 20-year reign, has also skewed our picture. What Bloch's biographer has called "the great subjects of modern and contemporary history" -- power, conflict, and change -- remain unexplored. If we admit that all history is contemporary, that historians ask the questions of their time, then these great subjects will again become paramount as we move into a new world, partly post-nationalist and post-Marxist. We may soon see a shift away from the history of society to the history of civil society. Here there are difficult questions for the historian of the Middle East -- the origins of despotism, the instability of the state, the problem of tolerance. In this respect, I think the kinds of issues that have interested Bernard Lewis in recent years (such as political language) will come back to the fore, just as his brand of liberalism has triumphed.

The second question I want to treat, more briefly, is the question of periodization. Theoretically, of course, the entire past is the terrain of history. All of the past is historical past, from the dawn of time until the moment when I began this sentence. No period need be privileged. But in practice, historians periodize all the time, and accord special privilege to some periods over others. The Orientalists were fascinated by the

early classical period, and disdainful of the middle and late periods of Islamic history. When they became historians, they tended to show more interest in the periods of interaction with the West, from the Crusades to Napoleon. In our time, however, there has been a decided shift to what might best be called dark periods.

For the modern Middle East, this trend once again began with the British Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb. Gibb believed that the really decisive period in the transition of the Middle East to modernity was the 19th century, and in his essay on historiography, he placed priority on this period. And we now have a range of basic monographs on the 19th century. Yet it was Gibb who also determined that in order to understand the Middle East in the 19th century, one had to first make a thorough study of the 18th century -- that is, the Ottoman legacy. The result has been a push backward, out of the period of Western impact, and back into the moments when the Islamic world was still whole. In his most recent article, Hourani makes this argument: "The greatest task of the present generation of Middle Eastern historians [again, note Hourani's ease in assigning tasks] is perhaps to explore this Ottoman world [i.e. before 19th century], and it is now possible to do it because of the opening and exploitation of the relevant sources: not only the vast archives of the Ottoman central government in Istanbul, but those in the provincial cities, which are of equal, and for some subjects of even greater, importance."

Certainly, we need studies of the 18th century, and no one can deny the importance of the Ottoman legacy to the Middle East. And the sources are plentiful, which serves as an additional incentive. But do we really stand to make some great discovery on this ground, especially in the fields Hourani has marked out? In his 1974 essay, Hourani put emphasis on "the study of those gradual and long-term changes in production and trade which can

modify the basic social and even ecological structure of a society." Is there really evidence for any such change in the 18th century, in all the work that has been done since Gibb and Bowen? If anything, we are discovering that when it comes to deep structure, the 18th century was not unlike the 17th, which was not unlike the 14th, which was not unlike the 4th. The historian Ira Lapidus put it best in the opening of his own sweeping synthesis, A History of Islamic Societies: "The forms of agricultural and pastoral production, handicrafts, manufacturing, prevailing systems of exchange, and technological capacities are all older than, and continue through, the Islamic era in their inherited forms." Research has produced no evidence for such far-reaching structural changes before modern times. To study these is not to study change but continuity. It is, of course, important to know that in a given period, nothing much changed. But I wonder whether many young historians will really find this all that challenging intellectually, and whether we should send a whole generation into the Ottoman archives to prove it. It leaves me with the feeling that another dead end lies in wait.

But thankfully, in reality, we have not really been in the "age of social history." We have not all been Marxists and Braudelians. And an entire generation will not head off to Ottoman archives to work on the 18th century. Despite the drive by some historians (and organizations like MESA) to forge a consensus on priorities, historians go on pursuing their penchants. I think Ira Lapidus put it best:

Islamic history as a field of study proceeds without a consensus about its proper subject matter, its temporal and spatial boundaries, or the correct methods of research and writing. It is a field divided by important intellectual differences, which are not merely academic, for they are the vehicle of moral, ideological, and political disagreements. On a less profound level, niceties of academic status and the

ever renewed conflict of generations are also involved. Usually we do not look into such issues, but it is worth noting that there are heavy stakes in the discussion. Some people are no doubt firmly attached to their chosen positions and may prefer conflict to clarification and resolution of the issues. Let a hundred flowers bloom!

In other words, the writing of history is an individual pursuit. The next generation, your generation, has no other task than to do what all generations have done before: to follow your interests in any direction you so please, probably in rebellion against the generation of your teachers.

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